

# Col. Ingersoll, Mark Twain and the Bonanza Mine

Another Chapter of Mr. Townsend's Reminiscences of the West That Was Wild.

By EDWARD W. TOWNSEND.

## II.

MR. McCARTHY told me to "hang around" the editorial rooms until I had decided whether I would go along further in mining, or take up newspaper work, and if I decided in favor of the latter he would give me a letter which would secure me employment on either of the then two prominent San Francisco papers. He found enough work for me to do as a reporter to ease my conscience about taking a modest salary, and as I was not yet disposed to return to San Francisco but wanted to see something rougher, more of a Bret Harte mining camp life, the temporary arrangement suited me. As I shall presently relate, this plan gave me the chance to become editor of not one, but two newspapers; one in a new and rough camp, Bodie, Cal.—some readers may recall song and stories about the "Bad Man from Bodie"—the other in an old and once abandoned camp, then revived, Aurora, Esmeralda county, Nev.

In one thing I was of real use to the *Chronicle*, the writing of a weekly summary of the Comstock mines development and prospects, for my familiarity with the jargon of mine work enabled me to translate into English understood by the many the technical language used by mine superintendents with whom I talked. This work made it easy for me to obtain passes for visitors who wanted to go down into deep mines which were then worldwide sensations as gold and silver producers, and had enriched the English language with a word which found permanent lodgment, "bonanza." I take as evidence of general interest in such a wonderful discovery the fact that I have been asked hundreds of times to tell the story, and will briefly tell it here as it was told there.

### The Gold Strike.

In one of the North End group of Comstock mines rich ore had been found in the ledge by a crosscut on the 1,300 foot level, or thereabout (it is not convenient to verify, and the exact depth is not important in the story), and a drift (a tunnel parallel to a ledge) had been started from which more crosscuts were to be run to develop the ledge further. This drift ran under the ledge, that is, back of the hanging wall, the under one of the two walls of clay which inclosed the quartz, and was supposed to be some distance from the wall. The gang running the drift, after setting off a blast, returned to their work to clear away for the dump cars the knocked down

rock. Instead of finding the face of the drift wholly in country rock, porphyry, the clay wall was found on the side nearest the ledge, and a miner with his pick, peeling off a strip of the clay wall, uncovered ore so rich that he shouted his astonishment not only at the richness of the ore but that the ledge should be there at all. Whether he realized all that it meant to find the ledge bulged into the drift is not known, but the shift boss realized something of the meaning, and the superintendent, hastily summoned, realized more.

### A Distinguished Visitor.

The ledge had increased in width beyond any calculation; it was an enormous kidney of amazingly rich ore—a bonanza! Again an old miner's saying had been verified: "No one can see further into a ledge than his pick goes." I was told that the miners in that drift did not leave the underground works for a week or more; that they were fed "on turkey and champagne," and lodged in a cooling room, held incommunicado while the insiders alone had exact information upon which they furiously bought stock. San Francisco, the whole Pacific coast, went wild. The mine was divided into two mines and the shares of each, doubled in number over the total shares of the original corporation, went to prices which, in calmer and sorrier days, it was said would not have been justified if the ore had milled \$200 a ton and ran through to China. Thus the bonanza was discovered, and the great fortunes of two saloonkeepers and two teamsters, Flood and O'Brien and Mackay and Fair, were made; partly out of that balloon shaped distention of the ledge filled with rich ore, partly in Pine street. San Francisco's Wall Street.

Robert G. Ingersoll lectured in Virginia City, and when I interviewed him for my paper he expressed an eager wish to visit one of the bonanza mines. Mrs. Ingersoll and their two daughters were with him and he was pleased when I told him that the two big mines had provided dressing rooms for women as well as for men visitors. "I'll take the ladies with me," he declared. He did but not without overcoming some objection. When Davis and I called for the Ingersoll party after the evening lecture Mr. Ingersoll was in high spirits over the prospects, but the ladies were in a doubting mood. They had heard disturbing reports. It was very hot, was it not? And very wet in places? Did not the hoisting machinery run the elevators (cages, in miners' language) over the tops of the supports (the sheaves)? We assured them that the elevators were run at

reduced speed when visitors were aboard, and experienced guides looked carefully after the safety of sightseers. As to excessive heat or moisture, visitors were dressed to meet those conditions.

When the ladies came from their dressing room they wore similar outfits to ours, heavy shoes and stockings, overalls, flannel shirts, cloth caps, and one garment we did not wear, ankle length rubber coats. The shift boss who was to be our guide in honor of the distinguished visitors overheard the ladies say something about their rubber coats, and he thought to reassure them by saying that they would not be bothered with them in the underground works, only in going down the shaft, which was dripping wet. He had misunderstood; they were pleased to have their miner's costumes covered with coats. They rebelled at the intimation that they were expected to shed their coats underground. "Oh, come on, girls," Col. Ingersoll urged, "Hundreds of ladies, I'll bet, have worn the same costumes down in the mines."

When our cage had dropped down to the 1,700 foot level, as I recall, at reduced speed, about twice that of an express elevator in a skyscraper, and we stepped out on the station floor, the ladies were asked for the sake of comfort and safety to take off their coats. They did so reluctantly after the Colonel declared heartily, "Why, of course, take them off; you'll look like three beemish boys, that's all."

### Ingersoll and Hell.

The heat in the drifts and crosscuts we first explored was modified by drafts of air forced down from the surface and the expanding air from compressed air tools. "Pshaw!" exclaimed Mr. Ingersoll, "They told me it was awful hot down here. Mere summer heat!"

Now, if you tell a boy who has a bruised toe that it isn't much of a bruised toe, he'll show you. The shift boss whispered to me to detain the ladies in the station's cooling room, for he "wanted to show the Colonel something." He piloted him along a blind drift, one which had no connection which would permit a draft of relatively cool air to circulate, and where machine tools were not yet in operation to exhale their icy breath, but where, at the face of the drift men worked with hand tools for only a few minutes at a time and then ran back to the cooling room for relief from the staggering heat. The boss told the story: He and Colonel Ingersoll walked along the drift until the heat scorched your nostrils when you breathed and the hot air was so foul you wished you hadn't breathed.



Mr. Ingersoll asked "Where are you going?" "To hell to cool off," the miner answered.

A miner rushing out, head bent down, was stopped by Mr. Ingersoll, who asked, "Where are you going, friend?"

"Going to hell to cool off," the miner answered, and rushed on.

"Perhaps we'd better follow him there," Mr. Ingersoll said to the guide, hastily suiting action to word. Later, we quizzed him about the incident. "Yes," admitted the Colonel, "that was what the miner said. It was a witty response if he recognized me; a good one if he did not."

We went down the incline as the shaft is called when it ceases to be verticle, and dips at an angle under the ledge, to the lowest level, convincing the visitors that the water in the sump, a rock basin at the bottom of the incline, was hot enough to boil eggs, and then took seats in the giraffe, as the cage in the incline was called. The boss drew the signal cord slowly four times. "What's that for?" Mr. Ingersoll asked.

"Signal, sir; visitors aboard; slow."

"My good friend," Mr. Ingersoll said impressively, "if your signals and other devices result in getting us to the surface of the dear earth I'll write you an obituary which will make the angels turn green with envy."

### Mark Twain's Brewery.

Mr. McCarthy told us stories of Mark Twain's sojourn in Virginia City. "What Sam"—as he called him—"liked best here were our Sunday visits to the brewery." This oasis was at the mouth of Seven Mile Canyon on the edge of the desert into which the Carson River sinks, after the manner of Nevada rivers. A German had discovered here a spring which he developed into a considerable water supply—considerable for that region—built a brewery, cleared an acre or two of sage brush land, irrigated it and grew vegetables. One must know the dusty, hot torture of that desert to appreciate the delight to the eye—and other organs—to come upon a little cottage upon whose shaded porch cool beer, rye bread, cheese and freshly pulled onions are at command.

One Sunday we made up a horseback party and guided by our editor, rode down the canyon, and after a turn a few miles over the desert, "Just to be fit to appreciate the blessing coming to us," McCarthy said, returned to the shady porch and the good things there set forth. "Yes," said McCarthy, "this was what Sam most enjoyed in Nevada. 'We come here,' he once remarked, 'drink beer, eat rye bread, cheese and onions and, refreshed in body and soul, return to our fastidious friends with breaths perfumed like buzzards. It is a triumph of sumptuary freedom.'"

There was brisk racial antagonism between Irish and Cornish miners which, when its fever rose above normal, could usually be reduced by contests of strength and skill related to their work. Once while I was on the Comstock this fever reached a degree where strong medicine was

needed. It took the form of a bare fist fight under London P. R. rules. The purse was of becoming weight, the betting vigorous. The Irish Knight was known to some fame as Dublin Pete; the Cornish contender was Jack Askew. Both had professional ring experience.

McCarthy assigned Davis to write the ring story, me to the introduction and the ringside story. My story was never written. Davis had secured a seat in the wagonette which was to carry Askew and his handlers; I preferred a saddle horse, for I had heard that the Sheriff was to harry us over the county border and I wanted means of transportation which did not depend upon highways. After the trailing caravan of vehicles and horsemen had been ordered from place to place many times and all pedestrians had been left out of sight, the sheriffs of our and an adjoining county agreed that they didn't know in whose jurisdiction was a likely looking site for the ring, and there the ring was pitched and roped. They were conscientious sheriffs, no doubt, but that spot in no man's land happened to be the only one we had come upon sufficiently cleared and level for the business in hand. Both sheriffs remained to see the fight. It was a long and hideous affair, and there was also some fighting outside the ring with gun and knife display, and had I not been there on duty, I would have quit long before the fighters did. But I was to "see all I could, hear all I could" so remained on the battlefield until the last were ready to leave. These were the defeated Cornishman and his sorry backers and handlers in the wagonette.

But my horse was gone! There was nothing for me to do but to take the seat reserved for Davis, which I did, by the side of poor Jack Askew. Both of his eyes were closed and the ear of which I had the most intimate view, was amazingly cauliflowered. I hated the sight of it, but could not help looking at it. Jack was in a bad way—he died a day or two later in a hospital—and at times I, with a man on the other side of him, had to keep him from falling off his seat. As we reached the edge of the city a backer said to Jack: "Looks 'ee 'ere, ole son; brace up a bit for the folks what'll be watching if you're game." With a dying effort the poor fellow "braced."

### Dinner for Two on \$10.

Of course I suspected Davis of having requisitioned my horse, and knew that he was justified; that he could ride 'cross country and not have to follow devious and bad roads, and only in that way reach the office in time for any sort of a first edition story. But such reflections did not modify my wrath nor make less miserable that wretched ride in the wagonette. So I bawled out Davis as a convicted horse thief until he soothed me by revealing that he had got off a story of the fight to a San Francisco paper for which he would



The Sheriff let us go to the condemned man's cell and we were there when he was told the inquisitors had decided against him.

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